

MAPPING FOCUS TO PROSODY IN ITALIAN: THE CASE OF WH-QUESTIONS

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1. In Italian, an exceptional prosodic pattern is observed in direct fully fledged wh-questions with bare wh-elements: Main Prominence (MP) fails to be assigned to the wh-element and to the default rightward position. In these structures, MP is rather typically assigned to the lexical verb: the latter, however, is not interpreted as narrowly focused (cf. Calabrese 1982, Ladd 1996, Marotta 2001, Bocci, Bianchi & Cruschina 2021; by MP we mean at once nuclear pitch accent and sentential stress):

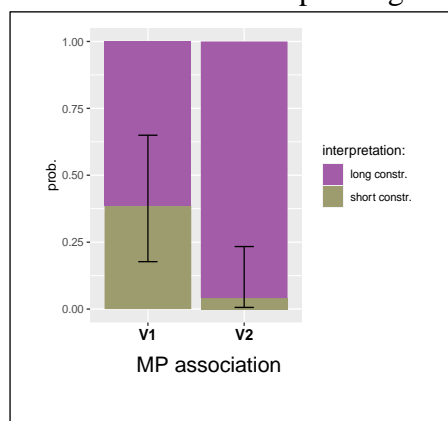
- (1) A chi hanno **chiesto** un aumento (MP marked by boldface)
to whom have.3PL asked for a pay rise

This spectacular dissociation of MP and focal interpretation raises the question of whether and how hearers are sensitive to this marked prosodic pattern in understanding a question. Our starting hypothesis was that MP placement is an *effect of cyclic wh-movement* and in particular, it marks a lexical phase head whose edge hosts an intermediate link of the wh-chain, as required by the Phase Impenetrability Condition. Furthermore, data from a production experiment (cf. Bocci, Bianchi & Cruschina 2021) showed that in biclausal questions with long distance wh-movement, main prominence can be assigned to the lexical verb either in the embedded clause or in the matrix clause. In contrast, in case of biclausal wh-questions with short distance wh-movement, MP is invariably assigned to the lexical verb in the matrix clause.

2. To assess the role of prominence distribution in comprehension, we tested trials containing shorts dialogues ending with a bi-clausal *wh*-question like (2B), which is compatible with both a long-movement and a short-movement construal, due to the optionality of the goal arguments (highlighted in italics in the context sentence (2A)):

- (2) A: Ho detto *all'amministratore* che i Bianchi hanno mandato una diffida *a Carla*.
have.1SG said to-the building manager that the Bianchi have sent a formal-notice to Carla.
B: Scusa, non ho capito. A chi hai detto__ che hanno mandato__ una diffida?
sorry, neg have.1SG understood to whom have.2SG said that have.3PL sent a formal-notice
'To whom did you say that they sent a letter of formal notice?'

Given the context (2A), two answers are congruent with the question in (2B): one involving the goal argument of the matrix predicate (e.g. *to the building manager*) and the other involving the goal of the embedded predicate (e.g. *to Carla*). Participants were asked to listen to the dialogue and answer a wh-question like (2B) taking Speaker A's role. The collected answers were recoded as corresponding to a short or long construal interpretation of the wh-question.



We manipulated MP placement in the wh-questions: MP falls either on the matrix verb **V1** (e.g. *detto*) or on the embedded clause verb **V2** (e.g. *mandato*). The prediction is that, if MP marking is relevant in comprehension, it should affect the participants' interpretation: in particular, MP on V2 would mark long-distance movement, invariably inducing the long construal. We tested 8 items under two conditions (MP on V1 vs. V2) and 40 native speakers of Italian. The results (Fig. 1) show that MP placement is a clue that hearers exploit to parse the structure in input. When MP is placed V2, a mixed effects

3. The evidence from comprehension confirms that MP placement is sensitive to the derivational history of the *wh*-phrase. Based on Bocci, Bianchi & Cruschina (2021) we adopt the syntactic assumptions (i)-(ii):

- As for the syntax-prosody interface we assume that:

- We will show that in Italian, the interaction between (iii.)-(v.) and (vi.) penalizes syntactic structures in which the only element endowed with [Focus] is a purely functional bare wh-phrase. More specifically, (iii.a) excludes the default prominence-assignment in fully-fledged wh-questions, while (iii.)-(vi.) prevent MP assignment to the wh-element. Therefore, a derivation in which the bare wh-element only agrees in its final landing will be always penalized over a derivation in which at least one lexical element obtains [focus] through optional agreement since only in the last type of derivation can (vi.) be satisfied.

$$(3) [{}_{\text{CP1}} \text{ WhP}_F \text{C}^0_{\text{F}} \dots [{}_{\text{vP1}} < \text{whP}_F > \text{v}^0_{(\text{F})} \dots [{}_{\text{CP2}} < \text{whP}_F > \text{C}_{(\text{F})} \dots [{}_{\text{vP2}} < \text{whP}_F > \text{v}^0_{(\text{F})} [{}_{\text{VP}} \dots < \text{whP}_F >]]]]$$

4. The assumption in (vi) is specific to Italian. Jitcă et al. (2015) report that in Romanian bare wh-elements systematically associate with main prominence. Notably also in Italian the interaction among (iv)-(vi) does not prevent a bare wh-phrase from associating with main prominence: in wh-fragments like (4), (vi) does not apply since the wh-element is the only overt element in the intonational phrase:

- (4) A: Hanno rotto qualcosa. B: Che cosa?
have.3PL broken something what?

Selected References:

- Bocci, G., V. Bianchi & S. Cruschina.** 2021. Focus in wh-questions. Evidence from Italian. *NLLT* 39(2): 405-455.
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- Ladd, D. R.,** 1996. *Intonational phonology*. CUP.
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